

'I wanted to be a priest-vet and pray for dead animals. I saw a big opening there, but then the clergy lost me.'

STEVE LEONARD is a vet and natural-history presenter. He is currently presenting *Incredible Journeys*, a BBC series about animal migration.

Interview by Sanjida O'Connell



What's your earliest nature-related childhood memory?

Doing leaf imprints and bark rubbings at primary school. I've always had a fondness for trees.

What inspired you to become interested in wildlife?

It was a collection of books by Willard Price about two brothers, Hal and Roger Hunt, who used to collect animals for zoos.

When did you first realise you wanted to be a vet?

From a very young age, five or six onwards. At one point I wanted to be a priest-vet, and pray for dead animals. I saw a big opening there but then I'm afraid the clergy lost me.

How did you end up being a natural history presenter?

By accident. I'd been filmed for an observational documentary

called *Vet School* and then *Vets in Practice*, and the Natural History Unit got a whiff of me.

What's been your most amazing encounter with a wild animal?

Being in the water with a great white shark. We were looking for bull and tiger sharks, and this great white rocked up when none of us were in the cage. It checked us out and disappeared, proving that great whites are not mindless man-eaters.

Which filming location have you enjoyed most?

The Arctic and parts of Namibia, two places where humans are yet to make a big impact on the planet.

What's the next big series that you want to make?

I want to make

a series that examines the relationship that humans have with dogs.

What are you doing to attract wildlife to your garden?

Not much. I've planted a few trees and maintain a healthy compost heap. I'm surrounded by fields on three sides so I do see a lot of birds and the odd bat. Unfortunately I have a cat who likes to show me parts of the wildlife.

Where do you go to get in contact with wildlife?

I bike around my local woods in South Cheshire or in Cannock Chase. I run into deer and see lots of raptors, and I've been told to look out for adders.

Where in the UK would you like to visit but haven't?

I haven't been to either Orkney or Shetland and they have a big fascination for me.

What's your favourite natural history book?

An awfully titled book *The Jaws of Death* by Xavier Maniguet about shark biology and shark attacks.

What's your favourite holiday location?

North Wales. I've seen a lot of the world and I still think that North Wales is one of the most beautiful as far as I'm concerned.




Who's your natural history hero?

David [Attenborough]. Like everyone else I grew up with him telling me about animals.

What's have you done to reduce your own environmental impact?

I sold my car and walk, cycle or take public transport. The worst thing I do is the amount of flights that I take for my job. There's no way I can justify it.

WATCH THE PROGRAMME

 **Incredible Journeys** (check Radio Times for details)

If you came back as another species, what would it be?

A wild dog. I think that the solidarity and the support they show each other is something that humans would do well to emulate.

